

VZCZCXRO5357
PP RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHDIR RUEHROV
DE RUEHJI #0473/01 3481323
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 141323Z DEC 09
FM AMCONSUL JEDDAH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1653
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 8631
RUEHDH/AMCONSUL DHAHRAN 0192
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUCNDTA/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0119
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC
RUCPDOG/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000473

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP, EEB/ESC, DRL, NEA/PPD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/14/2019

TAGS: [ECON](#) [KWMN](#) [PGOV](#) [SA](#) [SOCI](#)

SUBJECT: FIRST SAUDI WOMAN DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF CHAMBER OF
COMMERCE: PRESSING THE GLASS CEILING

REF: A. JEDDAH 391

[B](#). JEDDAH 453

[C](#). JEDDAH 465 AND PREVIOUS

JEDDAH 00000473 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Consul General Martin R. Quinn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary and comment

[1](#). (C) In a historic vote, the 18 members of the board of directors of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) elected a woman as deputy chairman, and several well-respected moderate businessmen to fill other leadership positions. No religious or tribal figures were chosen, despite their strong showing in the general election. The new board is focused on assisting victims of flash floods that struck Jeddah on November 25, as the JCCI -- one of a handful of authorized non-governmental organizations -- has taken the lead in collecting and distributing aid. While lacking a reformist agenda of the previous board, it seems unlikely to roll back the gains made by businesswomen during the past four years, and uniting to deal with a crisis may avert the predicted disputes among conservative and progressive board members. End Summary and comment.

A woman deputy chairman

[2](#). (C) Two months after highly contested elections (ref A) for 12 members and long-awaited appointments by the Minister of Trade of the other six (ref B), the board of directors of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) met December 7 and chose its leaders. In a historic vote, the 18 members elected a woman, Lama Sulaiman, deputy chairman -- the highest position reached by a woman at any Saudi chamber of commerce. The board also unanimously elected as chairman -- as widely expected -- the highly respected major businessman/land developer and President of the Islamic Chamber Sheikh Saleh Abdullah Kamel, who appeared at the press conference announcing the results in a wheel chair. Until very recently, Kamel was in Germany undergoing emergency medical treatment and his return to Jeddah in better health surprised many. The other deputy chairman, Mazen Batterjee, was a carry-over from the old board, and a female JCCI employee expressed satisfaction at his election,

saying he would support businesswomen. Abdullah Bin Mahfouz -- alleged in the press and by contacts to have bought votes in the race for the JCCI board of directors -- was chosen the JCCI's representative to the Council for Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry, a federation of all 25 Saudi Chambers of Commerce.

Religious conservatives blocked

¶3. (C) No conservatives were elected to leadership positions on the new board, despite their strong showing at the polls in the general board election. Contrary to expectations, there have been no reports of the most conservative new JCCI board member, Bassam Al-Akhdar, who campaigned against women mixing with men at the JCCI, refusing to meet with female JCCI board members or clashing with moderates -- as he did during the JCCI general election, according to unsuccessful female candidates. During his four years on the Jeddah Municipal Council, Akhdar has refused to speak with any female citizens or female diplomats, leading liberal city councilmen who have served with Akhdar to predict he would demand gender-segregated JCCI board meetings. According to Al Riyadh newspaper, Sulaiman denied to reporters that there had been any objections to her candidacy for deputy chairman on the grounds it violated Saudi religious prohibitions on genders "mixing." Speaking privately to the Consul General a few weeks earlier, Sulaiman recalled that when she assumed her position as a JCCI Board member five years ago, the religious police (Commission for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, or mutawa) had ruled that men and women could not use the same entrance, but she circumvented that obstacle by telling the enforcers that women would enter at 9 a.m. and men would arrive at 10. At first, she said, men were

JEDDAH 00000473 002.2 OF 002

uncomfortable having her at board meetings, but gradually many changed their attitude and now some actually ask her to sit next to them during meetings. Sulaiman's husband (also her cousin), Tarek Khaled Al-Sulaiman, last month predicted she would win over the conservatives eventually, saying her strategy is to work slowly and avoid confrontations.

After the flood, back to business as usual

¶4. (SBU) The new board, having been selected individually rather than as a slate, lacks the ambitious reform agenda of its predecessor. The new chairman told the press he was not a miracle worker, just a businessman appointed by the Minister of Trade, although Kamel vowed to continue the work begun by previous boards. When asked about Sulaiman's new post, Kamel reportedly replied that Saudi "women need to take their rightful place in society and work hand in hand with men." The board's current priority is coping with the aftermath of the flash floods that displaced thousands of Jeddawis. The JCCI, as one of the few officially permitted non-governmental organizations, has taken the lead in relief efforts (ref C). Kamel told the press -- which has published countless articles criticizing the local government's failure to prevent or cope with the floods -- that "the private sector was equally to blame in the natural disaster. The roads, bridges and tunnels which were damaged by the water were executed by contractors and businessmen from the private sector."

The new deputy "chairwoman": one of the boys in an abaya

¶5. (C) Sulaiman is overseeing the work of hundreds of volunteers distributing food, water, and supplies to Jeddah flood victims. A member of one of Jeddah's leading merchant families, Sulaiman is well-regarded in the Jeddah business community for her hard work in improving services to Jeddah

businesspeople, such as launching the Jeddah Economic Gateway, a website with business information. She also serves as a trustee of the JCCI businesswomen's center, and broke ground for Saudi women with her election to the JCCI board of directors in 2005. Sulaiman's husband, although appreciative of her public contributions, wishes that she would focus more attention on the family businesses.

¶6. (C) Sulaiman told the Consul General the secret of her success is to behave just like the guys do -- i.e., be direct and aggressive in targeting the electorate who are most likely to vote and call upon family reputation (who my father is, what my family connections are), "what I can do for you," and be very direct about asking for support and votes. UK-educated Ph.D. bio-chemist, quietly confident, married mother of four, and (5-year) breast cancer survivor, Lama said that most Saudi women are not conditioned to behave like men -- especially in the presence of Saudi males. Her incumbency, having learned the ropes at JCCI, and her merchant family background gave her clear advantages, she noted. At the same time, Sulaiman always dresses conservatively with abaya and head covering in public, although in private she wears western clothes and belongs to a westernized social circle that hosts private parties, sometimes including alcohol.

¶7. (C) Comment. Having had to deal with a crisis in its first few weeks, the new board -- composed of disparate individuals from a variety of backgrounds -- may be able to overcome its differences and unite to build a better future for Jeddah. With the focus on reconstruction, and widespread public appreciation of the hundreds of female volunteers who aided flood victims while male public employees were unreachable, the religious conservatives may find it difficult to implement their campaign promises to roll back the gains made by Jeddah businesswomen. End comment.
QUINN